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## *Studies of the Department of Theology of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches*

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In response to the dynamic and challenging circumstances of the 1950s, which saw churches increasingly coming together at the international level as confessional families and at the same time as churches seeking to overcome confessional identities and become united churches, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (today's World Communion of Reformed Churches) felt the need to do theology about church-world and inter-church relations by establishing a department of theology in 1959. Its first secretary until 1962 was the American young theologian and ecumenist Lewis Seymour Mudge Jr. (1929-2009), who had joined WARC already in 1957<sup>2</sup>. The main assignments of the WARC Department of Theology were to strengthen theological sharing among member churches, to represent Reformed opinion in international ecumenical dialogues and to facilitate cooperation in Reformed theological education.

Comparing the task of the Department with that of its Lutheran World Federation counterpart, a report of 1964 noted that “our tradition are less cohesive; our membership

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<sup>1</sup> Odair Pedroso Mateus, *The World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Modern Ecumenical Movement: A Selected, Chronological, Annotated Bibliography (1863-2004)*, Geneva, WARC, 2005, Studies of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 46; free downloading at academia.edu; *Beyond Confessionalism: Essays on the Practice of Reformed Ecumenicity*, São Paulo, Emblema, 2010. Free downloading: [https://archive.org/details/@odairp\\_mateus](https://archive.org/details/@odairp_mateus)

<sup>2</sup> Mudge harvested the fruits of his years with WARC in a remarkable book: Lewis S. Mudge, *One Church: Catholic and Reformed*, London, Lutterworth Press, 1963.



covers a greater variety of circumstances; our scope of interest is not so limited to the traditional questions of faith and order; several of our membership are United churches, and most are actively engaged in preparation for Church union that have an opportunity to do so”<sup>3</sup>.

Research work on the Reformed tradition with special reference to its contemporary significance underlined the implementation of those study mandates. Research happened through special studies undertaken in connection with general councils’ themes or theological topics identified by member churches or by the Department of Theology itself.

In what follows, I offer an overview of the main studies the Department undertook between 1954 and 2006. Other WARC departments did important theological work, but their work is not included in this paper.

### Ordination and the Ministry in the Reformed Tradition 1954-1960

This study was requested by WARC’s 1954 General Council. Its main aim was "to restate the characteristic Reformed understanding for the ministry and ministries of the Church". The report saw the pattern of the ministry of the Church as an extension of the three "offices" of Christ - prophet, priest and king, namely, proclamation of the Word, sacramental and pastoral functions, and ministry of church order and discipline<sup>4</sup>. As an interim report, it was presented to the 1959 Executive Committee in São Paulo, Brazil and referred to the Department of Theology for further work.

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<sup>3</sup> “Report of the Department of Theology”, in M. Pradervand (ed.), *Frankfurt 1964: Proceedings of the Nineteenth General Council of the Alliance of the Reformed Churches Throughout the World Holding the Presbyterian Order*, Geneva, Offices of the Alliance, 1964, p. 80.

<sup>4</sup> In connection with this study see Lewis S. Mudge, "Meaning of Eldership Seen as Vital Issue for Reformed Doctrine of the Ministry", *Bulletin*, 1(2), August 1960, p. 8-11.



The interim report was submitted to the Alliance's constituency and to individual theologians, with questions concerning the next steps to be taken; the adequacy of its theological basis; and practical situations that should be considered. The report was criticized on the following grounds: the ministry of the Church is not continuous with the ministry of Christ; the report was too clerical and traditionalist in its outlook; it tried "to set up a timeless doctrine of the ministry, when we can really deal with specific situations". The *Ordination and the Ministry* study was later included in the study on *Catholicity*.

### Catholicity and Oversight 1960-1970

In 1960, The Alliance's Executive Committee mandated the Department of Theology to undertake a study on "Catholicity as it might be understood by Reformed Churches". The study attempted at clarifying the role of Reformed churches within the new ecumenical situation created by the establishment of the World Council of Churches.

The theological secretary published in the *Bulletin* of the Department of Theology two articles that were "deliberately written to be provocative". Responses to the two articles were provided by well-known Reformed theologians such as Jacques de Senarclens, Thomas F. Torrance, John Macquarrie, Markus Barth and others. They were published in different issues of the *Bulletin* of the Department of Theology<sup>5</sup>.

"Catholicity as It Might be Understood by Reformed Churches" was a working paper published by the Department of Theology in August 1961. Its structure was as follows: I. The Ecumenical Movement and the Problem

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<sup>5</sup> *Bulletin*, 1(3), December 1960, p. 6-9; *Bulletin*, 1(4), February 1961, p. 9-12; and "Some Reformed Churchmen Speak their minds: Letters to the Editor on Catholicity", *Bulletin*, 2(1), Summer 1961.



of Catholicity. II. Christology and Ecumenical Theologizing. III. The History of Christian Thought: Two Points of Viewing. IV. The Practical Business of Union.

The Dutch Reformed theologian Hendrik Berkhof presented a paper on "The Catholicity of the Church" to the 1961 summer meeting of the Alliance's European Theological Committee. The paper had the following sections: 1. The history and present meaning of the idea; 2. Pleroma in the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians; 3. Theological consequences for the concept of catholicity; 4. A few ecumenical consequences. As a result, the European Area Council produced seven theses on the meaning of catholicity for Reformed Churches.

A series of essays on the theme by the Dutch theologian H. Berkhof<sup>6</sup> and Lewis Mudge's book *One Church: Catholic and Reformed – Toward a Theology for Ecumenical Decision*<sup>7</sup> grew out of that study and raised questions later assigned to the consideration of the 1964 General Council. The of section III of that council reflected the work done on catholicity.<sup>8</sup>

In connection with the study on catholicity, the same General Council requested the Department of Theology "to consider the question of oversight (Greek *episkope*) in the Church, with particular reference to union negotiations"<sup>9</sup>. The Alliance European Theological Commission was requested to take up this assignment. Its chairman, J.K.S. Reid, presented a report on the theme to the 1970 General Council<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> H. Berkhof, *De Katholiceit der Kerk*, Nijkerk, The Netherlands, 1962.

<sup>7</sup> London, Lutterworth Press, 1963.

<sup>8</sup> "Come Creator Spirit for the Calling of the Churches Together", in M. Pradervand (ed.), *Frankfurt 1964: Proceedings of the Nineteenth General Council of the Alliance of the Reformed Churches Throughout the World Holding the Presbyterian Order*, Geneva, Offices of the Alliance, 1964, p. 220-225.

<sup>9</sup> M. Pradervand (ed.), *Frankfurt 1964...*, p. 225.

<sup>10</sup> "Report on the Study of Episkope". *Nairobi 1970 – Proceedings of the Uniting General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Presbyterian and Congregational)*. Geneva, WARC, 1970, p. 184-195.



## The Theological Basis of Human Rights 1970-1976

The 1970 General Council recommended that the Department of Theology undertake a study on "The Theological Basis of Human Rights and a Theology of Liberation". The study would include consideration of such questions as: "How can I be free? God liberating or oppressing? Can the Church be a liberating Church? What does freedom mean when applied to institutions? Freedom as creativity – a biblical concept?" A report of the work in progress was published in 1975<sup>11</sup>.

Jürgen Moltmann wrote a discussion starter<sup>12</sup>. It "stimulated a wide response from groups of theologians and churches throughout the world". Between 1971 and 1975 many of the member churches, some officially and others unofficially, as well as several special committees and groups of theologians produced a variety of statements on several aspects of the issue in question. In a consultation held in London in February 1976, attended by 21 participants from 14 countries in all continents, the final statement, drafted by Jürgen Moltmann and Jan M. Lochman, was approved<sup>13</sup>. According to Richmond Smith, then Executive Secretary, "up to the present [1982] the report has gone through several major reprintings in English, French, German and Spanish. What is more to the point, the report has been very favourably received through the Reformed family and far beyond".

Following an initiative sponsored by the WARC in 1977, it was proposed that a limited research project be

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<sup>11</sup> "The Theology of Human Rights and the Theology of Liberation", *Reformed World*, 33(6), June 1975, p. 268-274.

<sup>12</sup> J. Moltmann, "A Christian Declaration on Human Rights", *Reformed World*, 34(2), June 1976, p. 58-72.

<sup>13</sup> "The Theological Basis of Human Rights", *Reformed World*, 34(2), June 1976, p. 50-58.



implemented, involving Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed theologians concerned with the study of the theological basis of human rights. An informal inter-confessional study-group met in Geneva in 1980 and produced a "Report of a Limited Research Project on the Theological Basis of Human Rights"<sup>14</sup>.

In the context of the 1982 WARC General Council's rejection of the apartheid system as a sin and the 1983 Executive Committee call for an worldwide ecumenical gathering of churches to bear witness to peace and justice, the John Knox International Reformed Center organized in August 1987 a seminar on "Forms of solidarity: Human Rights"<sup>15</sup>.

In connection with the 1989 General Council debates on Christian witness in view of the ecological crisis, WARC published a "Proposal for enlarging the Universal Declaration of Human Rights"<sup>16</sup>. The Alliance 1994 Executive Committee meeting recommended that "measures be taken for the revival of the proposal to hold a consultation on the theological imperatives for human rights, and its implementation before the 1997 General Council." In the following year, the Executive Committee authorized "the holding of a small consultation on the theological imperatives of human rights, to revise the 1977 [sic] Theological Statement on Human Rights". A consultation held in 1997, with the assistance of the World Council of Churches and of the Lutheran World Federation, realized that a simple revision of the Theological Statement

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<sup>14</sup> "Report of a Limited Research Project on the Theological Basis of Human Rights", *Reformed World*, 36(8), 1981, p. 370-375.

<sup>15</sup> *Forms of Solidarity – Human Rights*, Geneva, John Knox International Reformed Center, 1988.

<sup>16</sup> Lukas Vischer (ed.), *Rights of Future Generations – Rights of Nature – Proposal for enlarging the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Geneva, WARC, 1990, 68 p. Contents: Proposal for a resolution; I. Human Rights, Rights of Humanity, and Rights of Nature (Jürgen Moltmann and Elisabeth Geisser); II. The Rights of Future Generations (Peter Saladin and Christoph Zenger); III. The Rights of Nature (Jörg Leimbacher); IV. Rights of Creation – Theological Perspectives (Christian Link); IV. The Role and Contribution of the Churches (Lukas Vischer); Appendix: The United Nations 1982 World Charter for Nature.



on Human Rights was not appropriate and that a new statement should be prepared.

WARC's theological journal *Reformed World* dedicated two 1998 issues to the theme "Theology and Human rights. Contributors included Alan D. Falconer, Jill Schaeffer, Clement John, Russel Botman, Charles Harper and Julio de Santa Ana and Sun Soon-Hwa.<sup>17</sup>

### Called to Witness to the Gospel Today

In its 1980 Executive Committee meeting, WARC received a memorandum prepared by Lukas Vischer on behalf of the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches. The memorandum requested the Alliance to work out a position paper on "certain distinctive theological issues which challenge the life and witness" of the Reformed family, to be presented to the upcoming 1982 General Council.

In response, The Executive Committee called an international consultation in August 1982 to draft that paper. A special committee on "Reformed Witness Today" met during the 1982 General Council and reshaped the original draft in the light of ongoing debates. The General Council received the document and instructed that it be sent to all member churches for reactions and responses.

The Document recognized the "manifold ways in which the Spirit is at work in our midst", e.g., opening new doors, helping churches to discover in new ways the challenge and relevance of the Gospel and helping churches and individual Christians to bear steadfast witness in situations of injustice, repression and persecution. At the same time, it identified three major challenges: "the Gospel of Jesus Christ himself", "the promising and threatening developments of the contemporary world" and "the encounter with other

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<sup>17</sup> *Reformed World*, 48 (2, 3), June, September 1998.



churches in the ecumenical movement". The response to these challenges required a common effort of reflection and action. The Document intended to be an invitation to such a common effort. It dealt with four themes: I. The Central Affirmation: Jesus Christ – Lord and Saviour; II. Re-thinking the Reformed Heritage; III. Communion in Christ – A Sign of Christ's Presence in the World; IV Witness in a Threatened and Divided World.

This study, under the coordination of C.S. Song until 1986, became the main programmatic focus of the Alliance between the general councils of Ottawa 1982 and Seoul 1989. The study text *Called to Witness to the Gospel Today*<sup>18</sup> was published as the first volume of the series "Studies from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches". It was translated in several languages. Regional consultations related to the study were held in Africa, Latin America, Asia and Europe.

"Called to Witness to the Gospel Today – Cairo Consultation – 1984". *Reformed World*, 38(2), June 1984. Contributions by Allan Boesak, Ansley Coe Throckmorton, Lukas Vischer, Peter D. Latuihamallo, Grégoire Ambadiang de Mendeng, N.K. Dzobo and C.S. Song; "Called to Witness to the Gospel Today: Two Responses from Korea", *Reformed World*, 39(4), December 1986. Texts by David Kwang-Sun Suh and Keun-Won Park; "Response to 'Called to Witness to the Gospel Today' – by a team of theologians and laypersons from Taiwan". *Reformed World*, 41(1), March 1990, p.23-32.

The findings of the study fed into Section I, "Towards a Common Testimony of Faith", of the 1989 General Council<sup>19</sup> held in Debrecen, Hungary.

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<sup>18</sup> *Called To Witness to the Gospel Today*. Geneva, WARC, 1983, 52 p.

<sup>19</sup> "Towards a Common Testimony of Faith", in E. Perret (ed.), *Seoul 1989, Proceedings of the 22<sup>nd</sup> General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches*, Geneva, WARC, 1990, p. 171-178.



## Who Are We Called to be? Reformed Self-Understanding

The World Alliance 1989 General Council noted that "our sense of Reformed identity seems less secure than in the past" and requested "fresh exploration of our common Reformed ethos".

The Department of Theology submitted to the Executive Committee the proposal for a study process on the "Reformed Self-Understanding"<sup>20</sup>. Following the agreement of the Executive Committee, the Department of Theology issued a call for papers and organized, between 1993 and 1994, a series of regional meetings held in West Africa<sup>21</sup>, Southeast Asia<sup>22</sup>, Caribbean-North America, Europe, Latin America and Pacific.

The findings of individual contributions<sup>23</sup> and regional meetings were reviewed and summarized in the course of a consultation held in Auburndale, USA, in 1994 and fed into section I of the 1997 General Council.

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<sup>20</sup> For individual contributions to the study see: *Reformed World*, 43(1-2), March and June 1993. Essays by F. Balasundaram, Karel Blei, Margrethe Brown, Lydia A. Eleblu, Lynn Japinga, George Sabra, Enyi B. Udoh, Lewin L. Williams and Henry Wilson (guest editor).

<sup>21</sup> *Who Are We Called to Be?* – West Africa Regional Consultation – Ghana, 9<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> February, 1993. WARC, n.d., 63 p.

<sup>22</sup> Yeow Choo Lak & Henry Wilson (eds), *Being Reformed Christians in Asia Today*, Singapore, ATESEA, 1994. Contributors: Kamol Arayapruteep, M.P. Kody, Yeow Choo Lak, Lydia N. Niguidula, Wilhelmus A. Roeroe, C. Sangzuala and Henry Wilson.

<sup>23</sup> *Reformed World*, 43(1-2), March, June 1993. Articles on Reformed self-understanding by: F. Balasundaram, Karel Blei, Margrethe Brown, Lydia A. Eleblu, Lynn Japinga, George Sabra, Enyi B. Udoh, Lewin L. Williams and Henry Wilson (ed.).



## Christian Fundamentalism Today 1993

The consultation on "Christian Fundamentalism Today" was planned and carried out jointly by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity of the Roman Catholic Church. It was held in Mülheim, Germany, in 1993 and gathered 24 participants from 12 countries. According to a preparatory document, the consultation intended "to analyse and discuss the phenomena of fundamentalism. The primary focus will be Christian fundamentalism. The consultation will assess the impact of Christian fundamentalism within Christian world communions and their ecumenical relations".

Henry Wilson (ed.), *Christian Fundamentalism Today – The Papers and findings of the WARC/LWF/PCPU Consultation – 22 to 26 February 1993*, Geneva, WARC, 1994. Contents: Fundamentalism: The Indian Experience (George Matthew); Fundamentalists, Protestant and Catholic: An Ecumenical Challenge? (Thomas F. Stransky); A Mainline Protestant Perspective (Kirsten Nielsen); Fundamentalism, Churches, Church Relations: A Roman Catholic Perspective (Remi E. Hoeckman); A Conservative Evangelical Perspective (Heinrich Schäfer); An Interpretative Lutheran Reflection (Kirsten Nielsen); An Interpretative Reformed Perspective (Malachie Munyaneza); An Interpretative Roman Catholic Reflection (Teresa Gonçalves).

## Ordination of Women and Emerging Ecclesiologies

The ordination of women in Reformed churches was the theme of a consultation held in Geneva in 1992 by the World Alliance's Department of Partnership of Women and Men, then known as PACT. Contributions from biblical, systematic, historical and contextual perspectives were published in the book "*Walk, My Sister*" – *The Ordination of Women: Reformed Perspectives*. According to the consultation,



Reformed churches should undergo major structural changes in order to incorporate the gifts of women.

Ursel Rosenhäger & Sarah Stephens (eds), *"Walk, My Sister" – The Ordination of Women: Reformed Perspectives*, Geneva, WARC, 1993. Exegetical studies by Nirmala Vasanthakumar, Isabel Apawo Phiri, Sang Chang, Elsa Tamez and Ursel Rosenhäger; Systematic theological studies by Henry Wilson, Esther Suter and Najla Abou Sawan; Historical study by Jane Dempsey Douglass; Social and cultural approaches by Martha Essem and Perpetua Numfor (Cameroon), Samuel Dansokho (Senegal), Susan Chuang (Taiwan), Osmundo Ponce (Guatemala/Colombia) and Amaal Tawfik (Egypt); Conclusion by Jana Opocenska & Milan Opočenský.

The question of ecclesiological exclusion, of those who have no access to church offices because of race, caste or social status, was further explored in the consultation held in Kampen, the Netherlands, in 1993 under the theme "Challenges from the Emerging Ecclesiologies to Ecclesial Renewal". The consultation, according to Henry Wilson, then Executive Secretary of the Department of Theology, "was an attempt to look at the question of church renewal, not just in general terms, but from the perspective of those whom our churches so often exclude".

Henry Wilson & Nyambura J. Njoroge (eds), *New Wine – The Challenge of the Emerging Ecclesiologies to Church Renewal*, Geneva, WARC, 1994. Main Contributions: Reinventing the Church: Base Christian Communities in Latin America (Guidoberto Mahecha), A New Vision of the Church: The Challenge of the African Independent Churches (F. Kimani Githieya), In the House of the Lord are Many Mansions (Doreen Hazel), Minjung Experience, Minjung Church (Kim Sung Jae), Womanist/Feminist Challenges for Wholeness (Isabel Apawo Phiri), *Ubi Christus Ibi Ecclesia*: Some Christological Themes Relevant in Formulating New Ecclesiologies (Pamela Dickey Young), We Are Not Alone (John Parry).



## Islam in Asia and in Africa

The World Alliance 1989 General Council encouraged member churches "to engage fearlessly in dialogue with persons of other faiths with a view to better mutual understanding, and for the renewal of society".

In response to this recommendation, the Department of Theology organized two consultations on Muslim-Christian relations. The first, on Islam in Asia, was held in Bangkok, in 1991, in cooperation with the Lutheran World Federation. It was an expression of ecumenical cooperation between two world communions who have been "committed to fostering interreligious understanding and dialogue between different religious communities". It brought together 26 Christian representatives "knowledgeable about the world of Islam and with a deep commitment to promoting Christian-Muslim relations in their respective contexts".

Paul Rajashekar & Henry Wilson (eds), *Islam in Asia – Perspectives for Christian-Muslim Encounter*, Geneva, LWF-WARC, 1992. Main presentations and regional reports: Theological and Historical Rationality Behind Christian-Muslim Relations (Charles Amjad-Ali); Resurgent Islam: Its Political Implications for Asia (Andreas D'Souza); Islamic Resurgence and Asian Culture and Society (Hilario M. Gomez). Reports on Christian-Muslim relations in Bangladesh (M. Eugenia), India (Andreas D'Souza), Indonesia (Ng Kiok Nam), Pakistan (James Channan), Philippines (Robert Day McAmis), Sub-Saharan Africa (Hans Haafkens), Middle East (Jan Henningsson), and Europe (Jan Slomp). Bible studies by Olaf Schumann.

The Second consultation, on Islam in Africa, took place in Malawi, in 1994. It gathered 22 people from 9 African countries. Its purpose was "to assess the different types of relationship that exist between Christians and Muslims in different African countries and to learn from one another's experiences".



H.S. Wilson (ed.), *Islam in Africa – Perspectives for Christian Muslim Relations*, Geneva, WARC, 1995. Contents: Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (J. Haafkens), Christian-Muslim Relations in South and South-East Asia (H. S. Wilson); Country Reports: Cameroon (Alfred Ondo), Ghana (Johnson Mbillah), Kenya (Lawrence P.K. Mbagara), Malawi (T. A. G. Mwambila), Morocco (Hans U. Reitzel), Nigeria (Agwu Kalu), South Africa (Samson A. Khumalo), Sudan (Elom Sowu).

### Ethnicity and Nationalism 1990-1994

In response to the historical changes that took place in Europe in 1989, the Department of Theology organized two consultations. The first one was held at Pensier, Switzerland in 1990. Its theme was "Christian Community in a Changing Society". It dealt with the meaning of those "sudden and drastic changes in societies around the globe" and tried to discern the challenges that the new historical situation presented to the witness and service of the churches.

H.S. Wilson (ed.), *Christian Community in a Changing Society* Geneva, WARC, 1991. Main Contributions: Biblical Views on "Church-State" Relations and their influence on Existing Political Ideologies (Norman K. Gottwald); A Historical Survey of Reformed Views on the Relationship between Church and State (Eberhard Busch); "'Foedus' and 'Vocatio': The Reformed Orientation Towards Political Life" (Mario Miegge); Case studies on Church-State relations: German Democratic Republic (Johannes Langhoff), Czechoslovakia (Pavel Ruml), Northern Ireland (Daphne Gilmour), Lebanon (George Sabra), South Africa (Douglas Bax), South Korea (Chung-Hyun Ro).

The second consultation, held also under the impact of the ethnic crises in Bosnia and Rwanda, took place in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in 1994. Organized in cooperation with the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation, the meeting focused on one of the main characteristics of



the post-Cold-War Era, namely the resurgence of the question of ethnicity and nationalism related, among other factors, to the reorganization of nation-states. The World Alliance, wrote Henry Wilson, then Executive Secretary of the Department of Theology, attempted in that consultation "to engage its member churches in evaluating the emerging social and political forces"<sup>24</sup>. According to Théo Tschuy, the Colombo meeting "called on the churches to reassess their history critically and to evaluate their own involvement and their inadvertent support for nationalism and ethnocentric ambitions".

The following papers presented to the consultation were published in *The Ecumenical Review*<sup>25</sup>: "Understanding Ethnicity and Nationalism" (by Jayadeva Uyangoda); "A Vision of Embrace – Theological Perspectives on Cultural Identity and Conflict" (by Miroslav Volf); "Ethnicity and Nationalism in Sudan" (by James Mabor Gatkuoth); and "Hungarian Minorities in Europe: A Case Study" (by Robert J. Pátkai).

### Gospel and Cultures 1993-1996

The regional conference on "Called to Witness to the Gospel Today" held in Cairo, Egypt, in 1984, referred to culture as one of the urgent reasons that "compels us now to engage in theological effort and credible witness". In response to the "urgent need... to develop theological understanding of cultures based on actual experiences in specific cultural contexts", the Department of Theology organized a consultation on "Theological Explorations into Cultures". It

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<sup>24</sup> "Ethnicity and Nationalism: A Challenge to the Churches", with an introduction by Henry Wilson. *Reformed World*, 45(3), September 1995, p. 113-124; Ethnicity and Nationalism: A Challenge to the Churches", in Théo Tschuy, *Ethnic Conflict and Religion*, Geneva, WCC, 1997, p. 150-156

<sup>25</sup> *The Ecumenical Review*, 47(2), April 1995, p. 189-224.



took place in Bali, Indonesia, from March 25-29, 1985<sup>26</sup>. Of 26 participants, 23 represented 16 member churches of the Alliance in Indonesia. Papers presented dealt with the following themes: "An Approach to other Cultures – The Case of the Church in Bali"; "African Ancestor Cult: A Theological Appraisal"; "A Christian Reflection on Beauty in the Japanese Cultural Context"; "Experiments of Inculturation in the Toraja Church"; "Indigenous and Reformed – The Meeting between Christianity and Pre-Literary Religions and Islam on an Eastern Indonesian Island".

The WARC 1993 Executive Committee decided on the recommendation of the Department of Theology, to undertake a study process on Gospel and Cultures in close cooperation with the World Council of Churches. The findings of this study would feed into the 1996 WCC world conference on mission and evangelism as well as into the 1997 General Council of the Alliance. After an exploratory meeting held in Auburndale, USA, in 1994, and a study involving "individuals, congregations, small groups, theological faculties and institutions" in different regions of the world, a major conference took place in Tana Toraja, Sulawesi, Indonesia, in 1996. The *Gospel and Cultures* study had four main *foci*: Authentic witness within each culture (Mission); local congregations in pluralistic societies (Education); empowerment of identities in community by the gospel (Liberation); one gospel – many expressions (Cross-cultural sharing). Participants from 23 countries attended the meeting.

The Bible studies and a series of regional approaches to the theme of this study process were published in Henry Wilson (ed.), *Gospel and Cultures*, Reformed Perspectives, Geneva, WARC, 1996. 159 p. ISBN 92-9075 -030-8. Contributors included: R. Arce Valentín, K. Blei, M. Brown, A. Case-

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<sup>26</sup> "Theological Explorations into Cultures (Bali Consultation I)", *Reformed World*, 38(6), June 1985; "Theological Explorations into Cultures (Bali Consultation II)", *Reformed World* 38(7), September 1985.



Winters, C. Duraisingh, S. Dansokho, P. Holtrop, C. S. Song, E. Templeton and H. Wilson.

### **The Mission of Reformed Churches Today 2001-2004**

In preparation for its General Council held in Accra, Ghana, in 2004 under the theme "That All May Have Life in Fullness", WARC leadership called for a "gathering process" through different initiatives such as publications and meetings. It was also expected that through this gathering process and through the General Council itself WARC member churches would be encouraged to indicate the ways they intended to respond together to the call of the 1997 Debrecen General Council addressed to engage in a process of recognition, education and confession on matters of economic justice and ecological destruction. In close connection with the "gathering process", the 2000 WARC Executive Committee decided to implement a "process for reflection and development of a mission statement and other strategies that might lead to a renewal of mission in the churches".

In its report to the same Executive Committee meeting, the Department of Theology noted that "what we need is a focus on mission that will produce fresh missiological thinking and energy in response to the new contexts in which Reformed churches find themselves at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century". The aim of this process "should be not just a statement on mission but the renewal of our churches for a fresh understanding and engagement in mission". It should produce suggestions as to how "this theme might be developed at the next General Council".

The WARC Executive Committee asked the Geneva Executive Staff to nominate a small core group to design this "process for reflection and development of a mission statement and other strategies that might lead to a renewal of mission in the churches". According to the WARC Department of Theology, this core group should gather data



"from many current efforts among our constituency" and "gain insights from the Mission in Unity Project". It should pay attention to academic missiology, "but even more important, to the lived missiology of the people of God in the contemporary world", to develop a "dynamic interactive process with the churches" and consider the new global situation.

In order to carry out this mandate, a consultation was held at "Le Cénacle", Geneva, Switzerland from July 4-8, 2001 to design the above-mentioned study process. The results of that consultation were submitted to the 2001 session of the WARC Executive Committee.

Regional consultations were conducted in 2002 and 2003 in Yaoundé (Africa), Bali (Asia), Georgetown (for Caribbean and North America), and São Paulo (for Latin America). The report "Together in Mission: Voices from the Regions" fed into the work of the 2004 general council held in Accra, Ghana.

### Globalisation and Church Structures, 2001-2002

The Lutheran World Federation and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches held a study on the challenges that the new cultural situations shaped by economic globalisation raise to the way the Reformation churches organise themselves to witness to the Christian gospel today. The preparatory meeting took place in Geneva, February 20-25, 2001. Lutheran and Reformed participants submitted short papers on the theme, discussed and agreed on the general content and methodology of the consultation, which was held in Tutzing, Germany, February 3-7, 2002.

The 2002 meeting dealt with the issue of the Protestant heritage in the horizon of the changing faces of Christianity and religion with particular attention to church institutions. It discussed case studies of Reformation churches from different parts of the world that are or have just gone



through restructuring processes. It then dealt with issues such as "Gospel and Church Structures" and the future of Reformation churches in the ecumenical movement. A selection of contributions to this joint study was published in 2003.

From an “alliance” of churches to a  
“communion” of churches (2005)

After the general council held in Accra, Ghana, in 2004, WARC’s Executive Committee launched a reflection about the Alliance’s self-understanding and vision as a framework for decisions about its future programmatic work. One of the important dimensions of that discernment process was the willingness to strengthen the bonds of fellowship among the member churches.

This was expressed in the dynamic terms of an “alliance” of churches becoming a “communion” of churches, along the lines of a similar move that led the Lutheran World Federation to identify itself as a “communion” of churches, i.e. a fellowship of churches that have declared to be in “pulpit and altar” fellowship with each other and, by so doing, have formally committed themselves to a deeper level of common life that can be described as a Reformation attempt to manifest visible catholicity beyond the local or national levels.

To facilitate initial discussions on that vision, more difficult to be implemented among Reformed churches than among Lutheran churches, I drafted a paper, “Called to be a Communion of Churches”, available on my page at [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu) and on at Internet Archive<sup>27</sup>. Its main sections are I. The vision: from an “alliance” of churches to a “communion” of churches; II. “Alliance” means federation; III. Koinonia: Communion; IV. Towards a

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<sup>27</sup> [https://archive.org/details@odairp\\_mateus](https://archive.org/details@odairp_mateus)



discussion on communion; V. Communion and Compassion.

In the following years, the merger between the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Reformed Ecumenical Council, consummated in 2010, led WARC to rename itself as World Communion of Reformed Churches, but not because of a process involving its constituency at their highest level of synodal decision making, comparable to what the Lutheran World Federation accomplished between its assemblies of Budapest in 1984 and Curitiba in 1990.